

I have always had a sense of adventure and wanderlust, so choosing Taiwan as my study abroad destination initially did not intimidate me too much. I had been to China, and wanted to continue studying Chinese, however I was not sure I could make long term it in any of the cities I had visited there. My former professor, who had taught at Dong Hwa, had assured me there was a certain "magic" to the east coast of Taiwan especially. I had read a bit about it and every single bit I read was true regarding safety, helpfulness of the people, and overall quality of life. Though this year abroad challenged me in many other ways, not one moment in my year did I ever feel real fright building up in me, as often happens in accordance with my adventurous disposition.

When I was finally preparing for the last stages of my journey last year, however I did begin to stress about the actual implications of moving halfway around the world for an entire ten months. I began to furiously study Chinese, worried I wouldn't be able to communicate with my volunteers when I arrived. I was so nervous, I even left my cell phone on the airplane, frantically rechecking information last minute. The second I arrived in Zhixue, things began to settle down, and continued to be settled until I am packing up now 10 months later. I found my exchange here at Dong Hwa to be exactly what I was searching for. A nurturing, beautiful environment where I became "decultured" by virtue of exposure to so many students from different backgrounds, was able to improve my Chinese, and plenty of time in 18 week semesters to think deeply about my studies, and what I hope to do in academic, and after university.

The initial process of moving into Zhixue was a bit of a challenge of an adjustment, as how to get food, and navigate the couple of housekeeping tasks, such as moving some of my friends out, buying a scooter, could prove to be a challenge, especially given the language barrier, however this was soon forgotten. Once equipped with a scooter to access the surrounding areas, a whole new world is opened up.

Another minor challenge can be fully breaching into Taiwanese social circles. This is completely understandable given the relatively short amount of time US exchange students will be here for. The language barrier (though many Taiwanese students really have excellent English, especially classmates taking college level courses in English) can often be a hindrance, though I have found once broken can provide hours of fun and consistent humor over miscommunications, if one takes the patience to work things out. Even at my university as well, I've noticed that the foreign students tend to group together, and considering they are going through similar experiences, it can be a good idea. However, I also have met friends here whose Chinese is at least conversational, but could not become fully involved with his Taiwanese friends, for example rooming next year, or being frequently invited to dinner. Though this experience could be subjective, I myself experienced a bit of "social exhaustion" due to being in a different language and cultural environment. I like many exchange students whose experiences I have read, started off strong. I wanted to get my feet on the ground in Taiwan, I joined clubs, continued a hot pursuit of Chinese. I made my best effort everyday to chat with my roommates, classmates or anyone I could. I got a job nearby campus for a local farmer, and I relished in accompanying him on errands, seeing the daily Zhixue farm life. However, I soon found out that I was burning the candle at both ends so to speak.

Looking back, the more I tried, I was often pushing people away, and with my busy schedule, I realized I was slowly becoming more and more exhausted, until I did not have energy

to stay awake in class. I then went through a recovery period, where I would get something to eat after class, and go straight back to my dorm to read, and to bed. In the process I ended up ending some of the ties I had tried so hard to establish. I eventually ended up quitting my part time job, and finding a better balance. But my advice to students eager to begin their study abroad experience would be to be patient at first, instead of taking on too many activities, taking too many trips, and then becoming “burned out”.

For me coming from a cold, dry climate in Wyoming, another major adaptation was the weather here. I think the daily inconvenience of getting caught in the rain, or sweating through your shirt may also add up, and to this day, contributes to a bit of my slower pace of life here. Though the whole concept of “island time” is a big factor as well. Despite the heavy rain, I still really enjoy the semi-tropical rainforest here. I have enjoyed many of the hiking trails, waterfalls, and of course Liyu Lake, all within a short bike or scooter of campus. My department of natural resources offered a walk around campus pointing out how many different insect species our campus hosts. That of course does mean you will have to get used to seeing a cockroach every once and while as well. My department also offered a field trip to an indigenous village where elders took us up to the forest and showed us the plethora of food they could simply forage. Some highlights of my experience at Dong Hwa include a National History and Trauma class I took, which gave me a background on the history of ethnic relations in Taiwan. Though much of Taiwanese culture still confounds me, I think I would have been even more confounded and come off as exceptionally ignorant when discussing these things throughout my time here. I would highly recommend this course or another equivalent covering Taiwan’s history to any incoming exchange student as a way to get the most of your “experiential learning”. Because experiential learning is my favorite type of learning, some of my other highlights of the year include the several field trips hosted by my department, or the OIA. We visited Loshan where we made tofu from scratch, toured an organic fertilizer plant, (mind you I study agriculture), visited the fishing port of Shitiping to learn about the industry and the environment, and had professors take us to two Amis, and one Kavalan Village. These days, seeing the countryside and traveling with my classmates and professors were some of my favorite during my time here. Like many things opportunities for travel often depend on your involvement. For example my roommate, a foreign student who has been here for 2 years already was given the opportunity to travel all the way to Nepal. So if this is something that interests you, make sure you sign up in time talk to your professors, and check for emails from the OIA.

I found that getting involved in events hosted by the school is a great way to make friends across cultures. I met a Taiwanese student, helping her to snap a photo after the cultural dance and music night. We began to chat, and eventually decided to work together on the HULT prize competition. This was an enriching experience in itself, and though we did not win, my classmates who did went on to meet even more dedicated bright young people at the next regional round in Bangkok. We ended up becoming fast friends, and over winter break instead of returning to my country, we traveled around the island, and volunteered for a rice farm in beautiful Sanshing, Yilan. Living with here and the caring family who hosted us gave me another window into life in Taiwan beyond our college. This is also something I would recommend to exchange students. Because I recall being struck by how similar university students here were

to others around the world. Because many of us enjoy social media, watching the same dramas, and hanging out with friends, often talking to a different generation can give you into a window into the real differences, or similarities.

Overall at Dong Hwa, I have had knowledgeable, involved and caring professors, a network of international students that took care for one another, reasonable classwork expectations, and lastly kind and friendly fellow students who made me feel immediately comfortable and right at home, even in such a foreign environment. This is what made me glad I stayed here for two semesters, as I kept on meeting new people, and experience different side of Dong Hwa through their groups of friends or activities they did. And it is always fun just to get some zhenzhu naicha with new faces, keep a positive attitude and you will truly enjoy your time in Dong Hwa. Given I can work out the leaving procedure, everything has run smoothly administratively, and I have received lots of support from the staff at OIA to help me to get my ARC, work permit, and address all my other concerns. I hope more students will continue this exchange from our two universities.